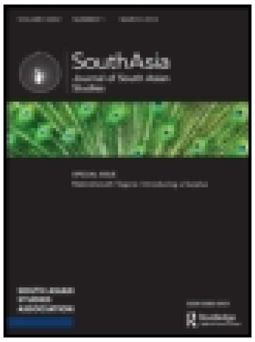

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B.R. Ambedkar, Franz Boas and the Rejection of Racial Theories of Untouchability

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Ambedkar's challenge to racial theories of untouchability. It examines how Franz Boas' ideas about race, via Alexander Goldenweiser, influenced Ambedkar's political thought. Ambedkar is situated as a thinker aware of larger changes taking place in Western academia in the early twentieth century. During his time at Columbia University, Ambedkar familiarised himself with ideas that rejected the fixity of identities and racial hierarchies; following Boas, he rejected the idea that the untouchables' place in society was determined by their supposed racial inferiority. Instead, he argued that untouchability was a cultural problem that could be stamped out.

KEYWORDS

Ambedkar; *'Annihilation of Caste'*; Boas; caste; Goldenweiser; race; untouchability; untouchables

This paper analyses B.R. Ambedkar's challenge to racial theories of untouchability. I pay particular attention to how Franz Boas' ideas about race, via Alexander Goldenweiser, influenced Ambedkar's political thought, so situating Ambedkar as a thinker aware of larger changes taking place in Western academia in the first half of the twentieth century. At this time, there was an abandonment of positivist theories that located social sciences as a continuation of natural sciences; in short, positivism had explained the world through natural laws that would fit any given society despite specific contexts or cultures. This thinking had informed notions of racial superiority and evolutionist theories throughout the world, but at the turn of the twentieth century, it had been challenged by important scholars at Columbia University such as John Dewey and Franz Boas.[1] By linking Ambedkar's writings with Boas', I show that during his time as a student at Columbia, Ambedkar familiarised himself with ideas that rejected the fixity of identities, societies and racial hierarchies. Throughout the essay, I show how, at different stages in his career, Ambedkar put into practice concepts similar to those used by Boas in order to condemn the practice of untouchability. In other words, Ambedkar rejected the idea that the identity and place

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1. The legacy of Dewey's ideas for Ambedkar has been studied by several authors including Arun P. Mukherjee, 'B.R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy', in *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (2009), pp. 345–70; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005); Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Scott R. Stroud, 'Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar and the Rhetoric of Religious Reorientation', in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (2016), pp. 4–27.

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in society of untouchables were determined by their supposed racial inferiority. Instead, he emphasised the importance of culture, which, in Boas' vision, included the environment, psychology and language, elements that were key in the construction of identities and societies. Ambedkar adopted this mode of thinking to argue that untouchability was not fixed or hereditary, but was a cultural problem that could be fought and eradicated.

The essay is divided into four sections. First, I give a brief introduction to the intellectual context wherein Boas was writing against positivist and naturalist understandings of society. Second, I turn to Ambedkar's rejection of racial theories of caste. Here I claim that he was inspired by the work of Boas. Rejecting racial theories allowed Ambedkar to attack caste and untouchability in a way that was different from other Indian leaders such as Jyotirao Phule and M.C. Rajah. Third, I show how Ambedkar constructed an argument that highlighted how the structures of individuals or groups in societies were determined by the cultural and psychological circumstances surrounding them; Ambedkar believed that untouchability could be overcome through cultural change, such as conversion. While still influenced by a Boasian notion of culture, the third section also shows some of the intellectual breaks between Ambedkar and Boas, in particular the differences in their understanding of psychology and its role in social change. Finally, the last section offers some concluding remarks and points to new connections between modern anthropology, Ambedkar's thought and the field of global intellectual history.

Anthropology, Ambedkar and Boas via Goldenweiser

Ambedkar's unique analysis of untouchability came from his years as a student at Columbia University in the USA. Ambedkar's decision to go to America was unusual: at the time, Indians studying abroad usually preferred to go to Britain. American academia was gaining importance in this period, and furthermore, the borders of academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology and anthropology were being redefined in America in a very different way than in Britain and its colonies. It is in this context that Ambedkar's academic genealogy becomes relevant.[2]

With the support of the Gaekwad of Baroda, Ambedkar arrived in New York in 1913,[3] where he found an exciting intellectual milieu. As noted by Eleanor Zelliot, Columbia University was in its golden age:[4] important figures such as James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman, John Dewey and Franz Boas were working at Columbia and were on their way to leaving a permanent mark on American academia. The most prominent of these intellectuals were Dewey and Boas. Dewey gained worldwide prominence with his writings about pragmatism, while Boas became widely known as the father of modern

2. For more on the way anthropology developed in India, see Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar and Satish Desphande (eds), *Anthropology in the East* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010). For an overall view of the changes in American anthropology, see George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968); and George W. Stocking, *Delimiting Anthropology: Occasional Essays and Reflections* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).
3. See Eleanor Zelliot, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement* (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 2004), p. 64.
4. *Ibid*., p. 65.

anthropology and set a trend in the way communities across the globe were to be studied.[5] While there have been numerous works focusing on Ambedkar and Dewey, not much has been written about the intellectual relationship between the two men, although in a recent article, Gabriel Torres-Colon and Charles Hobbs noted that Boas and Dewey had common intellectual interests.[6] Their work acknowledged each other and dealt with similar issues. Dewey and Boas even co-taught a seminar at Columbia in 1914–15.[7] Torres-Colon and Hobbs also show that there was an intellectual interbreeding between Dewey's pragmatism and Boas' anthropology,[8] tracing how various American anthropologists of the Boasian school were influenced by Dewey.

Shifting the focus away from Western intellectual history, I trace the way that Ambedkar's rejection of race as a determinant of social hierarchy exhibits the influence of Boas. This will bring a new perspective to the way Ambedkar's ideas about untouchability have been studied so far, and pave the way to make larger connections between Ambedkar and other intellectuals, apart from nationalist leaders such as Gandhi with whom he is usually associated.

Ambedkar was a student at Columbia University from 1913 to 1916. His main area of study was economics, but he did not limit himself to this discipline. His student records show that he also took courses in sociology, politics, philosophy, history and even two courses in anthropology that lasted a full academic year. From 1915 to 1916, he attended the courses, 'General Ethnology: Primitive Man and Physical Environment' and 'General Ethnology: Primitive Religion, Mythology and Social Organisation',[9] led by Alexander Goldenweiser. It is here that we can establish a connection between Ambedkar and Boas because Goldenweiser was one of Boas' first generation of students.[10] After working at Columbia under Boas, Goldenweiser left to establish the anthropology department at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. There he taught prominent figures of modern anthropology such as Ruth Benedict and Leslie White who, like Ambedkar, questioned the importance of racial theories throughout their work.[11] Goldenweiser's life work focused on Native Americans, particularly on the Iroquois tribe, and he wrote extensively on issues regarding anthropological methods. His writings reflected a great many of the ideas of his mentor, Franz Boas.

In the early twentieth century, Boas was changing the way anthropology was being practised. He compiled most of his ideas in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), in which

5. See Marshall Hyatt, *Franz Boas, Social Activist: The Dynamics of Ethnicity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Anthony Darcy, 'Franz Boas and the Concept of Culture: A Genealogy', in Diane J. Austin-Broos (ed.), *Creating Culture: Profiles in the Study of Culture* (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 3–17; and Vernon J. Williams Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1996).
6. Gabriel Alejandro Torres-Colon and Charles A. Hobbs, 'The Intertwining of Culture and Nature: Franz Boas, John Dewey, and Deweyan Strands of American Anthropology', in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 76, no. 1 (2015), pp. 139–62.
7. *Ibid*., p. 142.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Ambedkar's coursework at Columbia was collected by Frances W. Pritchett. A basic list may be consulted in 'Courses Taken at Columbia' [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/courses.html, accessed 17 Feb. 2017].
10. Wilson D. Wallis, 'Alexander A. Goldenweiser', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 43, no. 2 (1941), pp. 250–5.
11. The first generation of Boas' students included people like Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir and Melville Herskovits. Each of them went on to establish anthropology departments in institutions such as Berkeley, Pennsylvania and Chicago. See Sydel Silverman, 'The Boasians and the Invention of Cultural Anthropology', in Fredrik Barth, Robert Parkin, Andre Gingrich and Sydel Silverman, *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French and American Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 263.

he challenged the racial typologies of the day that attributed fixed mental and physical characteristics to specific races. He rejected evolutionist theories and highlighted the importance of history, culture and psychology in human life. Boas believed that culture encompassed material, social and symbolic realms of life, arguing that there were multiple cultures in the world which were historically specific and linked to particular circumstances. For instance, he attributed the worldwide political domination of Europeans to numerous factors, including the technological advances made in Europe that rested on knowledge that had been developed by other cultures around the world. He claimed that the decline, and eventual colonisation, of groups such as the indigenous populations of the American continent were linked to germs and disease, rather than to racial superiority or a more advanced state of evolution. For Boas, 'historical events appear to have been much more potent in leading races to civilization than their innate faculty, and it follows that achievements of race do not without further proof warrant the assumption that one race is more highly gifted than another'.[12] In other words, human difference was, fundamentally, cultural rather than racial; and similarly, different cultures did not represent a timeline of the stages of development of human civilisation. Boas' paradigm thus had two main threads: the first was historical, tracing processes that explained the distribution of cultural traits; the second thread was psychological, focusing on how different cultures shaped the minds of individuals and how different cultural traits fitted together.[13]

Boas' criticism of racial theories of civilisation can be found throughout his work. Of particular importance was his rejection of racial theories justifying anti-Semitism. Being Jewish himself, Boas had experienced this type of discrimination both in Germany and in the United States. One of his more forceful arguments against anti-Semitism came when he participated in the United States Immigration Commission of 1907,[14] which investigated the impact of immigration on American values and culture. Based on the work of scientific racial theoreticians such as Daniel G. Brinton and A.H. Keane, the commission produced a 'dictionary of races' to classify people entering the United States.[15] It concluded that immigration from eastern and southern Europe was dangerous and should be restricted. Opposing the general views of the commission, Boas wrote a report rejecting anti-Semitic theories of race, which was later published as 'Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants' and became a landmark in Boas' career. In it, he emphatically rejected the proposition that the Jewish population had been racially isolated from other groups around the world. To prove his point, he compared the physical characteristics of Jewish immigrants and their offspring. He concluded that 'American-born descendants of immigrants differ in type from their foreign-born parents',[16] and he attributed such differences to the 'influence of American environment'. In particular, he claimed that the head measurements of Jewish children in America were very different from those of Jewish

12. Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944), p. 16.
13. Silverman, 'The Boasians and the Invention of Cultural Anthropology', p. 263.
14. James Pula, 'American Immigration Policy and the Dillingham Commission', in *Polish American Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (1980), pp. 5–31.
15. This 'dictionary' was prepared by Daniel Folkmar and Elnora Folkmar. See William P. Dillingham, *Dictionary of Races of Peoples* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911).
16. See Franz Boas, 'Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 14, no. 3 (1912), p. 530.

infants in Europe; in both cases, the head measurements of Jewish children were similar to the rest of the juvenile population in which they lived.[17] This argument is of particular importance for our purposes because, as shown later, Ambedkar rejected the racial inferiority of untouchables along the same lines as Boas refuted the racial inferiority of Jews.

Twenty years later, when the ideology of Aryanism became triumphant in Germany, Boas made his case against scientific racism even clearer. In an article entitled 'Aryans and Non-Aryans', he criticised the Nazi ideology that asserted that the Aryan race had 'certain biologically determined qualities which are entirely foreign to every "non-Aryan"'.[18] For Boas, the term Aryan was purely a linguistic one: it did not relate to racial difference: 'Aryan is anyone who speaks an Aryan language, Swede as well as American Negro or Hindu'.[19] The core of Boas' argument was that there was no such thing as a pure race because history showed that extensive human migrations had occurred since the glacial period. He highlighted Spain where there had been widespread mixing of Iberians, Phoenicians, Celts, Romans, Moors and Jews; similar conditions, he argued, were present across Europe. He concluded that it was a 'fiction to speak of a German race'.[20]

Boas also highlighted the absence of a connection between physical and mental characteristics. This was a direct challenge to the notion that Caucasians were mentally superior to people of African descent. Boas accepted that the various regions and peoples of the world had different 'mental characters', but that these were not related to race; on the contrary, he explained that mental characteristics depended on 'the unifying cultural bond which unites the people'[21] and that language and customs played a vital part in the creation of these bonds. This idea of culture brought an aspect of impermanence to the notion of identity because cultural bonds were learned or could be changed. Regardless of descent, anyone could adapt, learn and feel another culture as their own, leading to his view that a nation was not 'defined by its descent but by its language and customs'. This was a common phenomenon in Europe. Boas wrote that 'just as Germanized Slavs and French have become German in their culture, as the Frenchified Germans have become French, the Russianized ones Russian; so have the German Jews become Germans'. He concluded that through Aryan ideology, the Nazi government was trying to 'justify on scientific grounds their attitude toward the Jews; but the science upon which they are building their policies is a pseudo-science'.[22] In short, Boas denied the links between race and nation, making culture the key element in the formation of communities rather than race.

The concept of 'cultural bonds' highlighted by Boas is paramount. It will be shown later that, like Boas, Ambedkar adopted the conception of culture as fluid, in that he rejected the notion that the untouchables were racially inferior to the rest of the Indian population. In contrast to Boas, however, Ambedkar did not consider 'languages and customs' to be vital in the formation of a 'mental character'. First, Ambedkar knew that the untouchables were not a homogenous group, but that they had different languages and customs depending on their location in India. Thus their cultural bonds could not bring them

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 530–62. See also Clarence C. Gravlee, Russel H. Bernard and William R. Leonard, 'Heredity, Environment, and Cranial Form: A Reanalysis of Boas's Immigration Data', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 105, no. 1 (2003), pp. 126–7.
18. Franz Boas, 'Aryans and Non-Aryans', in *The American Mercury*, Vol. 6, no. 31 (1934), p. 219.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
22. *Ibid.*

together socially. Second, many of the customs practised by the untouchables had Hindu elements, which meant that efforts to justify their place in society could be found by recourse to religion. So, rather than relying on language and customs, Ambedkar emphasised the mental and psychological aspects of the construction of identity such as race and caste.

The rejection of race as a determinant of social structure also played an important part in the work of Goldenweiser. Similar to Boas, Goldenweiser considered that human behaviour was primarily determined by cultural differences learnt through social interaction.[23] He explained how such beliefs in race, or in notions such as racism and anti-Semitism, were not determined by birth but socially acquired:

> Prejudice, racial prejudice, is a group phenomenon, a social phenomenon. It is based on traditional backgrounds and is inculcated unconsciously into us early in life, before we know what is happening. And we cannot get rid of it unless we become, to a great extent, individualists, independent thinkers, persons who can stand on their own feet intellectually and emotionally, who are detached and capable of viewing things 'above the battle'.[24]

Goldenweiser's critique of race represents the line defended by him and Boas: 'It so happens that race is not merely a physical fact, is not merely a psychological fact—and in both these capacities we might as well disregard it on this occasion—but race today has once more, as so often before, *become a state of mind. Race is a state of mind. It is an attitude. We are replete with it*'.[25] In the 1930s, Ambedkar too would define caste as a state of mind.

If we assume that Ambedkar was exposed to such ideas during his course at Columbia, then to what extent did the Boas/Goldenweiser rejection of the fixity of race influence his arguments against the racial inferiority of the untouchables in India? At the turn of the twentieth century, racial explanations of caste were widespread both in India and in Europe, supported by the work of important intellectuals such as Max Weber and colonial ethnographers such as Herbert Risley.[26] The work of the latter was particularly influential in India. Risley's main thesis was that castes had originated from the racial differences between Indo-Aryans and Dravidians; the Indo-Aryans had 'subdued the inferior race, established themselves as conquerors, and captured women according to their needs'. After breeding enough females to serve their purposes, he argued, the Indo-Aryans had 'closed their ranks to all further intermixture of blood'. According to Risley, this marked the birth of the caste system. He was convinced that the 'principle upon which the system rests is the sense of distinctions of race indicated by differences of colour'.[27] Furthermore, he saw a connection between race and the structures of societies. Following the work of Topinard and Broca, he claimed that a broad nose was a marker of racial inferiority and

23. On Boas and race, see Thomas Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); for Goldenweiser and race, see Alexander Goldenweiser, 'Race and Culture in the Modern World', in *Journal of Social Forces*, Vol. 3, no. 1 (1924), pp. 127–36.
24. Goldenweiser, 'Race and Culture', p. 134.
25. *Ibid*., p. 127, emphasis added.
26. See Herbert Risley, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1908); see also Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958). For a review of the way Risley used race in relation to caste, see Susan Bayly, 'Caste and "Race" in the Colonial Ethnography of India', in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 165–218.
27. Risley, *The People of India*, p. 264.

backwardness, and that this was also true in terms of caste. Risley held that upper castes had a smaller nasal index than lower castes:

> If we take a series of castes in Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, or Madras, and arrange them in the order of the average nasal index, so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that his order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence. Thus in Bihar or the United Provinces the casteless tribes, Kols, Korwas, Mundas and the like, who have not yet entered the Brahmanical system, occupy the lowest place in both series. Then come the vermin-eating Musahars, and the leather-dressing Chamars. The fisher castes, Bauri, Bind, and Kewat, are a trifle higher in the scale; the pastoral Goala, the cultivating Kurmi, and a group of cognate castes from whose hands a Brahman may take water follow in due order, and from them we pass to the trading Khatris, the landholding Babhans and the upper crust of Hindu society.[28]

In short, Risley attributed a lower caste status to an inferior racial background. Such beliefs posed a challenge to Ambedkar, who needed to show that the untouchables were not inherently inferior to the rest of Indian society. To do this, he needed to find an alternative so that he could discard the racial theories of the time.

Ambedkar, race and caste

Ambedkar did not wait long to use the new anthropological ideas he had learnt at Columbia. In 1916, he presented his paper, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', in Goldenweiser's course, which attempted to explain the origin of caste. Not surprisingly, his essay reflected some of the main features of the Boasian school of thought. In particular, 'Castes in India' reads as a vehement rejection of the use of racial theories to explain the caste system. From the beginning of the paper, Ambedkar downplayed the importance of race in India, noting that the people of the subcontinent were 'a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians'.[29] This made racial differences irrelevant because 'ethnically all people are heterogeneous'.[30] Ambedkar was also very careful to underscore that racial explanations of the caste system were flawed and based on foreign conceptions of society. He argued that 'European students of Caste have unduly emphasised the role of colour in the Caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the Caste problem. But nothing can be farther from the truth'.[31] He continued to dismiss the ideas of Herbert Risley, one of the biggest exponents of the racial theories of caste, describing him as someone who 'makes no new point deserving of special attention'.[32] Furthermore, Ambedkar considered evolutionists and eugenic theories so absurd that, like Boas and Goldenweiser, he did not deign to discuss them in great detail:

28. *Ibid.*, p. 28
29. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1916] 1979–2006), p. 6.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Ibid., p. 21.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 8 This point was also noted in Ishita Banerjee-Dube, 'Caste, Race and Difference: The Limits of Knowledge and Resistance', in *Current Sociology*, Vol. 62, no. 4 (2014), pp. 512–30.

> Without stopping to criticize those theories that explain the caste system as a natural phenomenon occurring in obedience to the law of disintegration, as explained by Herbert Spencer in his formula of evolution, or as natural as 'the structural differentiation within an organism', to employ the phraseology of orthodox apologists; or as an early attempt to test the laws of eugenics—as all belonging to the same class of fallacy which regards the caste system as inevitable, or as being consciously imposed in anticipation of these laws on a humble population, I will now lay before you my own view on the subject.[33]

Instead, he highlighted the importance of culture and psychology in the genesis and development of caste, thus showing that caste was not immutable and could change over time.

Ambedkar's thesis consisted of four main points. First, he explained that despite the diverse nature of the Hindu population, India had a deep cultural unity.[34] Second, he noted that caste was the parcelling of a larger cultural unit into small pieces, made possible by making endogamy sacred to Hindu society. Endogamy was important because it was a way of preventing 'surplus women' and 'surplus men' abandoning their homes and joining another group that could potentially damage the original community. Thirdly, he defended the idea that there was only one caste, that of the Brahmans. He explained that before the caste system became widespread, the population of the subcontinent had been divided into classes.[35] Finally, Ambedkar argued that the dissemination of caste in India could not be explained religiously by the creation of the Laws of Manu because the Laws of Manu reflected practices already in existence in Indian society rather than imposing new practices. Building on the ideas of Walter Bagehot and French sociologist Gabriel Tarde,[36] he argued:

> Endogamy or the closed-door system, was a fashion in the Hindu society, and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin subdivisions or classes, who in their turn, became endogamous castes. It is 'the infection of imitation' that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes. The propensity to imitate is a deep-seated one in the human mind and need not be deemed an inadequate explanation for the formation of the various castes in India.[37]

Thus caste was neither racial, pre-social nor fixed in time. According to Ambedkar, caste derived from the practice of endogamy, and it involved environmental, cultural and psychological elements. It was specific to the culture of India and had spread through imitation. This meant that caste could be transformed or even unlearned.

Ambedkar's essay on caste was sufficiently innovative to be published in the 1917 volume of *Indian Antiquary,* the journal founded by the Scottish archaeologist James Burgess. However, his use of anthropological ideas went beyond academia. He continued to use ideas inspired by Boas and Goldenweiser to reject the practice of untouchability in

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33. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', p. 17.
34. *Ibid*., p. 6.
35. *Ibid*., p. 18. Ambedkar's vision of class in India reflects the *varna* system. However, he argued that such divisions were flexible and people were able change their classes according to their qualifications.
36. Ambedkar mainly used Gabriel Tarde, *Laws of Imitation* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1903).
37. Ambedkar, 'Castes in India', p. 18. The phrase, 'the infection of imitation', comes from the work of Walter Bagehot, an English journalist, economist and political theorist. See Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics: Or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of Natural Selection and Inheritance to Political Society* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1891), p. 95.

India, and to distinguish himself from other politicians who claimed to represent the untouchables.

Ambedkar returned to India in 1924.[38] With his remarkable educational credentials, he was soon noticed by the Mahar community in Bombay and by the colonial government that saw him as a potential political leader to counter the Congress' mass political movement. In 1927, he was nominated by the colonial government to serve as a representative of the Depressed Classes in the Bombay Legislative Council, remaining in that position for ten years. This gave him a platform to disseminate his new views on caste and untouchability.

Ambedkar's views on untouchability contrasted with mainstream explanations of the origin of untouchability in India. Former low-caste leaders like Jyotirao Phule (1827–90) and M.C. Rajah (1883–1943) argued that the untouchables were the original inhabitants of the subcontinent, part of a different race that was in need of protection after experiencing centuries of oppression from Aryan-Hindu conquerors. Phule's work illustrates how racial theories of untouchability were alive and well even before Ambedkar's time. Phule emphasised that the low castes or '*Shudras* and *Atishudras*' had been conquered and then exploited by the foreign 'Aryan Brahmins':

> The Aryan Brahmins established their own supremacy and domination over the original inhabitants here by conquering them in wars. The war-like Ksatriyas were *enslaved* and were given the pejorative name of 'kshudra' (insignificant)—which later was corrupted into 'Shudra'.[39]

Ambedkar was certainly aware of Phule's ideas. Even though Phule had died a year before Ambedkar was born, both men came from western India and shared the same benefactor, the Gaekwad of Baroda, and Ambedkar dedicated his book, *Who Were the Shudras?*, to the memory of Phule.[40] The connections between Ambedkar and Phule made the former's rejection of the racial explanation of untouchability somewhat surprising.

The idea that the untouchables did not belong to the Aryan race was also held by M.C. Rajah, a seasoned 'Paraiyar' politician who clashed with Ambedkar over the issue of separate electorates for the untouchables in the 1930s.[41] Originally from Madras (now Chennai), Rajah's career was linked to the education of the untouchables. He became a teacher in 1906 and founded a Dravidian school at Nugambakkam in 1936; he was also involved in several education committees in Madras.[42] Rajah was an active politician who firmly believed that the untouchables had a pre-Aryan origin. In 'The Oppressed Hindus', a pamphlet published in 1925, he wrote that there was a racial difference between the untouchables he claimed to represent and their oppressors.[43] He explained that in

38. K.L. Chanchreek, *Dalits in Post-Independence Era* (New Delhi: Shree Publishers & Distributors, 2010), pp. 175–8.
39. Quoted in Michael Bergunder, 'Contested Pasts: Anti-Brahmanical and Hindu Nationalist Reconstructions of Indian Prehistory', in *Historiographia Linguistica*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (2004), p. 63. See also Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994), p. 98.
40. B.R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*, in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1946] 1979–2006), p. 66.
41. The Paraiyar are a caste group from Tamil Nadu/Chennai (earlier known as Madras).
42. R.K. Kshirsagar, *Dalit Movement in India and Its Leaders* (New Delhi: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd, 1994), pp. 302–4.
43. M.C. Rajah, *The Oppressed Hindus* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2005).

Madras, the Depressed Classes were in fact 'Adi-Dravidas', the 'original inhabitants of the soil'[44] who represented the earliest civilisation of South India; they were a powerful community that had 'developed a complete civilisation of their own, with their democratic form of Government, their fine arts and a religion and philosophy of their own'.[45] However, the splendour of the Adi-Dravida civilisation had come to an end with the arrival of the Aryans. The people known as Dravidas had joined the ranks of the Aryans and been converted into caste Hindus, but the Adi-Dravidas of South India had resisted the Aryan invasion and so were penalised. In his pamphlet, Rajah described how the Aryan invaders made servants of the Adi-Dravidas, who were barred from religious matters and from carrying arms. Furthermore, the Adi-Dravidas 'were not only punished with social degradation, but were also stigmatized as untouchables and unapproachables'.[46] According to Rajah, the Adi-Dravidas or untouchables were a community that could be distinguished racially from the main body of the Hindu population.

At first glance, Phule's and Rajah's theories about the origin of the untouchables do not seem that different from the ones propounded by Ambedkar in relation to Buddhism.[47] In broad terms, the three of them suggested that, at some point, a large group of people had been deemed untouchables because they resisted Brahmanism; however, there are important differences that need to be highlighted. Phule and Rajah argued that the untouchables were the original inhabitants of India, meaning that there was a racial difference between the Aryan conquerors and the non-Aryan victims. At a time when evolutionist theories had not been entirely discarded, and when colonial officials like Risley often used racial arguments to legitimise their taking power, the connection Ambedkar drew between untouchability and Buddhism becomes more interesting. Defending the idea that the untouchables were Buddhists allowed Ambedkar to centre his argument in a cultural rather than racial field, and discard the idea that the untouchables were part of an inferior race conquered by Aryan invaders which thus justified their position at the bottom of Indian society.

Ambedkar's rejection of racial theories of untouchability was consistent throughout his career, both in his politics and his writings. For instance, in 1928, Ambedkar was called to make a submission to the Indian Statutory Commission (the Simon Commission), which had been appointed to investigate the constitutional future of India. Ambedkar gave evidence on the subject of the Depressed Classes: in May, he demanded adult franchise, joint electorates and reserved seats for the untouchables. Even though his demands were not acknowledged by the commission, Ambedkar made it clear that he did not share the racial explanation of untouchability that M.C. Rajah had defended a few days before. When Ambedkar was asked by John Simon if the untouchables were the original inhabitants of India, he refused to reply:

Ambedkar: [W]e cannot be deemed to be part of the Hindu community.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
47. See, in particular, B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*, in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1948] 1979–2006), pp. 239–382.

Chairman (John Simon): You come, I believe from an earlier set of inhabitants of this continent?
Ambedkar: That is one view, I think.
Chairman: It is supposed—we will not go into details—that you are pre-Aryan?
Ambedkar: Well, I do not know. That is a view.[48]

Ambedkar's participation in the Simon Commission is important for two reasons. First, it was the only time that Ambedkar argued for the untouchables to be part of the general electoral constituency, but only if universal franchise was granted. This demonstrates that he was committed to gaining recognition for the untouchables as a community with special needs for political representation. Yet he was still not ready to make a break with the larger Hindu community. Second, the Simon Commission marked the decline of M.C. Rajah as the most important representative of the untouchables in the eyes of the colonial government; after this, Ambedkar moved to the centre-stage of Indian politics and began to take part in various committees created to assess the problem of untouchability.

During the Round Table Conferences between 1930 and 1932,[49] the question of the untouchables' political representation came to the fore. These conferences saw the clash of two conflicting visions regarding the past, present and future of the untouchables and untouchability as national problems. First, M.K. Gandhi condemned the practice of untouchability, but maintained that because the people classified as untouchables were actually Hindus, they should remain in this position and condition. The second view was submitted by Ambedkar and, in it, he adopted a different position than Boas regarding the importance of language and customs in the makeup of identity. Ambedkar claimed that despite common Hindu religious beliefs, the history of discrimination and segregation suffered by the untouchables made them an element apart from the larger Hindu community. The recognition of this group as an independent political community was important politically for Ambedkar because it meant that the untouchables could claim separate electorates, thus denying caste Hindus the possibility of using politics as a powerful tool to dominate the lives of the untouchables. The British government supported Ambedkar, and in 1932, the Depressed Classes were granted special electoral protection in the form of the Communal Award. Gandhi did not accept this decision and began a fast in protest. Ambedkar reached an agreement with Gandhi after intense negotiations resulting in the so-called Poona Pact, whereby the untouchables were to remain politically classified as Hindus and not as a political minority. The demand for separate electorates for the untouchables was scrapped. As a result, Ambedkar's views of Hinduism became more radical.

48. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. Ambedkar before the Indian Statutory Commission on 23rd October 1928', in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 2, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1928] 1979–2006), p. 465.
49. There were three conferences held in London to discuss constitutional reforms in India. They were organised after the nationalists rejected the findings of the 1928 Simon Commission. Among the issues to be discussed were whether India should be granted dominion status; whether diarchy was still a sustainable form of government; and the design of the Indian electorate. The conference was attended by British politicians and political and religious leaders from India, including from the princely states. See D.C. Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Round Table Conferences, London 1930–1932* (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 1999).

In 1935, Ambedkar decided to abandon Hinduism. He addressed some of his followers at a conference at Yeola in Maharashtra, uttering his now famous words: 'Unfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that but I declare that it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu'.[50] Gradually, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism as his religion of choice for the untouchables. From the mid 1930s until his death in 1956, he developed a theory that ancient Buddhists had been punished by Hindus and became untouchables, and these writings continued to reflect the influence of his years in America. For instance, in 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), considered today as one of his seminal works, he rejected once again the racial origin of untouchability. Like Boas, he maintained that to treat caste differences as based on racial differences was 'a gross perversion of facts'.[51] He wrote:

> What racial affinity is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras? What racial affinity is there between the untouchable of Bengal and the untouchables of Madras? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Chamar of the Punjab? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of Madras and the Pariah of Madras? The Brahmin of the Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Pariah of Madras. *Caste system does not demarcate racial division.*[52]

Ambedkar also dealt with the question of the Aryan race in *Who Were the Shudras?*, written in 1946. Following the work of W.Z. Ripley,[53] Ambedkar took race to mean 'a body of people possessing certain typical traits which are hereditary'.[54] Like most academics of the time, Ambedkar was not able to reject anthropometry altogether, yet he remained critical of the supposed racial division of the people of India.[55] Although he still believed that the measurement of the human head was the only reliable way to determine race, he argued that caste was not racial. He stated: 'if anthropometry is a science which can be depended upon to determine the race of a people, then the result obtained by the application of anthropometry…disprove (*sic*) that the Untouchables belong to a race different from the Aryans and the Dravidians. The measurements establish that the Brahmin and the Untouchables belong to the same race'.[56] Differences in human skulls were non-existent in India, and they certainly did not support the division of people into castes.[57] As noted earlier, this argument was precisely the one used by Boas against anti-Semitic theories of race in which he showed that the physical characteristics of Jewish children in

50. Quoted in C.D. Naik, *Buddhism and Dalits: Social Philosophy and Traditions* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2010), p. 172.
51. B. R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1936] 1979–2006), p. 48. Here Ambedkar quoted from the Indian archaeologist D.R. Bhandarkar, who claimed: 'There is hardly a class, or Caste in India which has not a foreign strain in it. There is an admixture of alien blood not only among the warrior classes—the Rajputs and the Marathas—but also among the Brahmins who are under the happy delusion that they are free from all foreign elements'.
52. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
53. William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1900).
54. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?*, p. 66.
55. George W. Stocking Jr. showed how, during the early 1900s, racial and cultural ideologies had interacted for a long period of time and were often used together despite their often contradictory views. See George W. Stocking Jr., 'The Turn-of-the-Century Concept of Race', in *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (1994), pp. 4–16.
56. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?*, p. 302.
57. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', pp. 48–9.

America were more similar to the rest of the children in that country than to Jewish children in Europe.[58]

Untouchability as a cultural conflict

Ambedkar's explanation of untouchability reflected the focus on culture and psychology defended in the works of Boas; Ambedkar argued that the problem of untouchability was the result of social and cultural conflicts. In *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948), Ambedkar gave a historical account of how untouchability arose in India[59] in order to show that untouchability was not hereditary, ancestral or fixed. Even the title, framed as a question, suggests that untouchability is not a permanent state and has an explanation; it also proposes that identities can change over time because the untouchables were something else before being condemned to untouchability.

One of the main arguments of *The Untouchables* is that the group once comprised 'broken men', stray members of tribes that had been defeated by stronger groups.[60] After being routed, these broken men established themselves near the villages of settled tribes and agreed to work as watchmen or wards in exchange for food and shelter. According to Ambedkar, 'the broken men lived in separate quarters outside the village for the reason they belonged to a different tribe and, therefore, to different blood'.[61] Despite the use of the term 'different blood', Ambedkar clarified that he was referring to kinship rather than race. He went on to explain that the eventual categorisation of broken men into untouchables was due to cultural conflict, namely, that the settled communities were Hindus and followed a Brahmanical religious system, while the broken men were Buddhists who 'did not revere the Brahmins, did not employ them as their priests and regarded them as impure'.[62] The broken men hated the Brahmans because they were the enemies of Buddhism. In return, the Brahmans imposed untouchability upon the broken men because they would not abandon Buddhism and ate beef.[63] Thus, one of the roots of untouchability lay in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmanical order felt for Buddhists and those who continued to eat beef. This enmity was part of a struggle for power that was later transformed into canon law once Brahmanism became stronger than Buddhism in India. In other words, untouchability was the outcome of a cultural war:

> That the object of the Brahmins in giving up beef-eating was to snatch away from the Buddhist Bhikshus the supremacy they had acquired is evidenced by the adoption of vegetarianism by Brahmins. Why did the Brahmins become vegetarian? The answer is that without becoming vegetarian the Brahmins could not have recovered the ground they had lost to their rival namely Buddhism. In this connection it must be remembered that there was one aspect in which Brahmanism suffered in public esteem as compared to Buddhism. That was the practice of animal sacrifice which was the essence of Brahmanism and to which Buddhism was deadly opposed. That in an agricultural population there should be respect for

58. Boas, 'Changes in Bodily Form', pp. 530–62.
59. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, pp. 239–382. Ambedkar's book on the origin of the Shudras also points to the impermanence of identity in his ideas. See Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*.
60. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, p. 275.
61. *Ibid*., p. 277.
62. *Ibid*., p. 315.
63. *Ibid*., p. 317.

> Buddhism and revulsion against Brahmanism which involved slaughter of animals including cows and bullocks is only natural. What could the Brahmins do to recover the lost ground? To go one better than the Buddhist Bhikshus not only to give up meat-eating but to become vegetarians—which they did.[64]

After dealing with the cultural aspect of untouchability, Ambedkar turned to its psychological aspect. It is here that Ambedkar clearly broke intellectually with Boas. Following Dewey and, to a lesser extent, Goldenweiser, Ambedkar believed that psychology was closely linked to experience, and that this was key to the formation of individuals and communities. He was convinced that through meaningful experiences, individuals were able to question their conditions and change them. From this stance, Ambedkar's emphasis on education and religious conversion as ways to eliminate untouchability acquires a new meaning. By contrast, from an anthropological perspective, Boas was not interested in the psychology of individuals as such; rather, he 'wanted to determine the psychological laws which control the mind of man everywhere, and that may differ in various racial and social groups'.[65]

These tensions are understandable if we consider that Boas' main objective throughout his career was to understand different cultures, not necessarily to change them. His arguments remained largely in academia. Ambedkar, on the other hand, wanted to change the culture, the environment and the politics he lived in. For this to happen, the psychology of the untouchables themselves needed to change. It is important to emphasise here that Ambedkar was not the only intellectual of his time to find Boas' views on psychology inadequate: as noted by Torres-Colon and Hobbs, Boas' other students such as Ruth Benedict, Alexander Lesser and Gene Weltfish differed from their mentor in this matter. More importantly, like Ambedkar, the three of them found in John Dewey a way to address the shortcomings of Boas' thought. Lesser in particular used Dewey to emphasise the role of individual and social experience in the development of anthropology as a way to change intellectual currents and produce social change.[66] This sort of vision was also very clear in Ambedkar's understanding of the psychological aspect of untouchability and its connection to social change.

Since Ambedkar wrote 'Annihilation of Caste', he had argued that caste and untouchability were more than mere social practices because caste also had a psychological effect on people. It altered the way individuals behaved among others and how individuals or groups thought of themselves. In the same way as Goldenweiser had done years before, Ambedkar explained that caste was not a 'physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. *Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind*'.[67] In the same vein, in *The Untouchables*, Ambedkar described untouchability as an 'aspect of social psychology…a sort of social nausea of one group against another group'.[68] Despite being a state of mind, the impact of caste and untouchability was transformed into psychological violence in the form of notions of purity and impurity and the division of society into high and low

64. *Ibid.*, p. 346.
65. Franz Boas, 'Psychological Problems in Anthropology', in *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (1909), p. 371.
66. Torres-Colon and Hobbs, 'The Intertwining of Culture', pp. 139–62.
67. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', p. 68.
68. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, p. 370.

status. Belief in the religiously-sanctioned division of society had prevented individuals from taking action against an oppressive system because these beliefs became part of the subconscious of Indian society. He wrote:

> But if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly he has no consciousness of his enslavement. Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery. To tell an Untouchable 'you are free, you are a citizen, you have all the rights of a citizen', and to tighten the rope in such a way as to leave him no opportunity to realize the ideal is a cruel deception. It is enslavement without making the Untouchables conscious of their enslavement. It is slavery though it is untouchability. It is real though it is indirect. It is enduring because it is unconscious.[69]

The psychological aspect of untouchability, Ambedkar argued, led the untouchables and lower-caste Hindus to believe that 'they were condemned to be ploughmen and they never [would be] allowed to convert their ploughshare into swords'.[70] Moreover, due to being denied education, 'They (that is low-caste Hindus) could not think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly and not knowing the way to escape and not having the means of escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude, which they accepted as their inescapable fate'.[71]

Ambedkar's purpose in presenting untouchability as a psychological phenomenon was to make the untouchables aware that their social condition was not fixed or unavoidable; rather, he showed that untouchability was constantly being sustained through cultural and psychological violence. In order to eradicate it, the violence inherent in untouchability had to be exposed: 'No resistance to power is possible while the sanctioning lies, which justify that power, are accepted as valid. *While the lie which is the first and the chief line of defence remains unbroken there can be no revolt. Before any injustice, any abuse or oppression can be resisted, the lie upon which it is founded must be unmasked, must be clearly recognized for what it is*'.[72] By such an exposure, Ambedkar aimed to show the untouchables a way for them to abandon untouchability and attain social and cultural liberation.

Conclusion

From 1950 onwards, Ambedkar committed to his idea of abandoning Hinduism in favour of Buddhism. His interest in converting to Buddhism was clear when he was invited to attend the World Buddhist Conference in Colombo in May 1950. In 1954, Ambedkar announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism. Two years later, he finished the manuscript of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, although it was published only after his death.[73] On 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in a ceremony conducted by the oldest monk in India, the Burmese Bhikku Mahasthaveer Chandramani, in which Ambedkar was joined by hundreds of thousands of his followers. Three months later, on 6 December 1956, Ambedkar died at his residence in New Delhi.

69. B.R. Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto', in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, [1989] 1979–2006), p. 15.
70. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste', p. 63.
71. *Ibid*.
72. See B.R. Ambedkar, 'A Warning to the Untouchables', in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5, Vols. 1–21* (Bombay: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, [1989] 1979–2006), p. 399, emphasis added.
73. Zelliot, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement*, p. 180.

His body was conveyed to Bombay, where it was put on a funeral pyre at Dadar crematorium.[74]

Ambedkar's decision to embrace Buddhism has often been seen as a product of his disillusionment with politics.[75] Nonetheless, after considering the connections between the ideas of Boas and Ambedkar, one may suggest that his conversion was a sort of cultural and psychological rebellion against Brahmanism. It was a way to show his followers that changing their status in society was possible because there was no racial or inherent difference between them and the rest of Hindu society to prevent it.

This essay argues for the importance of examining Ambedkar's career in relation to the anthropological ideas of his time. It shows him not only as an informed scholar of current Western theories, but also as a critical analyst, innovator and practitioner of the ideas he believed in. As noted above, Ambedkar did not blindly follow the work of Boas, but transformed it to suit his political and ideological battles against untouchability. In doing so, Ambedkar made similar arguments as prominent Western academics such as Ruth Benedict and Alexander Lesser. It is important to be aware that Ambedkar's connections with anthropology do not end there: for instance, in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz drew several times on Ambedkar's concept of nationalism as a 'feeling of a corporate sentiment of oneness';[76] similarly, in *Homo Hierarchicus*, Louis Dumont, without acknowledging Ambedkar, defined caste as a state of mind.[77] While these themes will have to be developed further in the future, this essay is intended to open new paths in the debates surrounding the field of global intellectual history.

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74. *Ibid.*
75. For more on Ambedkar's conversion, see Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, pp. 121–3; see also Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 224.
76. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 256–92.
77. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 34.